



Government reform

What the *Declaration on Government Reform* gets right, and what it misses

Bronwen Maddox and Alex Thomas

Summary

Michael Gove has set out a new plan for reforming the civil service – and wider questions of how government works – that could lead to extensive changes. The *Declaration on Government Reform** was published in the name of the prime minister and cabinet secretary, Simon Case, showing that this has the full weight of the government behind it. Gove, in his role as chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, backing up Boris Johnson in running the machine of government, has however been one of the driving forces. It is, by the standards of these things, refreshingly brief with eight pages of text followed by 30 short action points.

It is strongest on “people”, the most familiar and tangible actions to improve the civil service – although these points remain stubbornly unaddressed over the years, partly because of vested interests among officials and cultural resistance to new entrants from outside government. It makes good points on “performance” – how to define it and set goals – although this is notoriously difficult territory. It is weakest on “partnership”; in search of alliteration, it has stapled to this document some thoughts about how ministers and officials work together that are admirable in nature but risk undermining accountability. Without clear lines of responsibility, as the Institute for Government has long said, many of these other reforms will struggle to achieve change.

* Cabinet Office, *Declaration on Government Reform*, GOV.UK, 15 July 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993902/FINAL_Declaration_on_Government_Reform.pdf

Why now?

Straight after the end of the G7 summit and a day after the prime minister was due to tell the nation whether coronavirus restrictions would be lifted forever, this might seem a surprising time to try to grab the headlines for the cause of government reform. However, it is a year on from a key speech Gove made on the same subject, and the government can claim that while the past year has brought only slight progress towards those goals, it now approaches the questions in the knowledge of what worked and failed during a year of extraordinary tests.

Ministers and the cabinet secretary might also have been influenced by the exit of Dominic Cummings – from government if not the headlines. They have weathered (so far) his onslaught of [accusations to parliament](#) about how they and government had failed and might even claim that this reform statement is part of the answer. They may also be relieved to have David Cameron's evidence to parliament about Greensill out of the way, given the weight these plans put on ethical codes and the integrity and impartiality of the civil service.

Many of the reforms to government are unsurprising

There are plenty of themes that will be familiar to civil service reformers from any point in the last half-century: the need for more focus on skills, better subject knowledge and team leadership, an effort to reduce the churn of officials moving jobs too quickly and plans to move London-based teams to other parts of the country. But there is new emphasis on diversity of recruitment, and relocation – or recruitment – of officials from around the UK. Half the senior civil service will be located outside London, it says; it seems this will affect all departments although inevitably some more than others. The statement also makes a renewed case for more movement of officials between administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the UK's central government, which could play a small but symbolic part of Gove's efforts to strengthen the union.

Just because some of the proposals are well known it does not mean that they are wrong. Reforming government is difficult and it is to be expected that the same themes recur. Ministers and civil servants need long-term application to make changes happen and for them to stick. This latest plan will be judged not on its novelty, but on whether it leads to real changes that last.

The Covid-19 response is an opportunity to make progress on government reform

The plan does break new ground in several ways. Most obviously it comes during a pandemic, and its authors rightly emphasise that the Covid-19 response should be a catalyst for reform, with [lessons learnt](#) about what failed and what succeeded. It draws on the contrasting experiences of vaccine and personal protective equipment (PPE) procurement, rightly asking why one could be such an achievement and the other a failure.

It makes the case for change, linking improvements to the structure of the state to the real-world priorities of the public. The government's political shape-shifting is evident when the plan talks about "building back better" after 1945 with changes that "required the re-wiring, and renewal, of government". Though as far as government and civil service reform is concerned, ministers and officials should raise their ambitions higher: 1945–51 was in fact a wasted opportunity for reform. For all the radicalism of the Attlee programme, the post-war government changed little until many years later.

The Covid-19 response also informs a revived enthusiasm for improving the availability and use of data to better inform decisions, to build a "[smarter centre](#)" to help free up departments while setting standards for performance, holding them to account and building a new focus on evaluation and scrutiny. An evaluation task force is part of the plan, which is good news but will need strong support to avoid getting watered down to avoid political and bureaucratic embarrassment.

The statement is also quite deliberately a plan for government, not just civil service, reform. There are numerous references to ministers, including improving their training and support, something the Institute [wholeheartedly endorses](#).

There is also a significant change of style from the last 18 months. The plan is presented as what it calls a "collective vision for reform", with an intent at least for ministers and civil servants to work harmoniously together for a common cause. That is positive, and while harmony should not compromise honesty between civil servants and ministers, and competing incentives on ministers and officials will make it hard to achieve, it is a more likely route to success than the all-out attack of 2019–20. The Cummings style has gone, but structural tensions remain.

Some of the toughest problems of government reform have been ducked

The plan covers the right areas, makes some good recommendations and should be welcomed. But it steps around some of the toughest questions about government reform. Ministerial influence over civil service appointments is fudged. Ministers should “have visibility of senior civil service appointments in the departments they lead”. The precise meaning of visibility, whether this changes anything from the rules currently in place, and how far this is an extension of the prime minister’s existing role signing-off permanent secretary and director general appointments will be keenly debated over the coming months and years.

It also leaves open the question of the areas where ministers should be held accountable and where civil servants should be. That means that some of the sharpest concerns about the clarity of accountability are unaddressed. Ministers are, intriguingly, to be set “targets against which [they] can be judged” – though none of the 30 specific actions set out gets close to describing how that might work. Ministerial success or failure will ultimately always be viewed through a political lens, but Johnson and Gove should aim for much more transparency on what secretaries of state are to be held accountable for, and be bold enough to make sure ministers feel the consequences of missed targets and disappointing results.

The document has more to say about the performance of senior civil servants. There is to be a bigger role for non-executive directors (NEDs) in assessing permanent secretaries. There are also references to work already underway on ‘outcome delivery plans’ that will aim to set out more clearly what departments are required to achieve, and a commitment to appoint more senior responsible owners to the civil service to be held accountable for the most important government projects. But we have been here before with single departmental plans and promises to boost NEDs. The commitment to bringing greater clarity to the roles, responsibilities and accountability of both ministers and senior officials is more an aspiration than a plan and will need far more detail and clear thinking if it is to succeed.

And there is a question of credibility for the government. The plan rightly reaffirms the government’s commitment to an impartial, honest, objective civil service that acts with integrity. That is the “bedrock of its success”. The principle of fair competition for public appointments is “inviolable” and the government will “take a zero tolerance approach to bullying”. Those commitments do not sit comfortably with a government – or a prime minister – that has not so far shown much commitment to these [underpinning principles of public life](#). A change in the prime minister’s apparent approach will be needed for reforms to succeed.

But overall this is a statement very much to be welcomed. It identifies the right areas for reform and includes a broadly credible list of actions for the government to pursue. An end to hostilities between ministers and civil servants would also be a good thing. However its success must be judged by how long the momentum for reform lasts, whether senior political attention persists – including whether Gove stays in a key post able to give this momentum – and how much change really happens over the coming years.

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